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SUBJECT: POLITICAL STATE OF PLAY IN MUTHANNA PROVINCE

Classified By: Acting PRT Muthanna Team Leader Wade Weems for reasons 1 .4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Muthanna cable, drafted to discuss the political state of play in Muthanna province by asking how provincial elections might play out if they occurred today.

Summary

¶2. (C) Muthanna politics (and politicians) are opportunistic and personal rather than ideological: individuals will affiliate with whoever controls the resources or the access they need at a particular point in time. For this reason, we judge that the most likely outcome of elections, should they be held today, would be election of the same core cast of characters, re-affiliated with whichever parties look likely to succeed in the elections. Muthanna residents' dissatisfaction with service provision might hurt Governor Hassani and his clique, however. While we would expect the Sadrist to gain a few seats on the council at the expense of the peripheral and technocratic members of the current Provincial Council (PC), popular resentment at recent JAM-instigated violence makes it unlikely that the Sadrist would see major gains. End summary.

Current Make-Up of the PC

¶3. (SBU) The current PC is relatively diverse, including members of national and local lists who come from a variety of tribal, religious, and technocratic backgrounds. From the national parties, SCIRI-affiliated politicians hold 7 seats (plus the governorship); Fadhila 6; Da'wa 4; the Iraqi National Accord (INA) 3; and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) 2. Local parties include the Middle Euphrates Gathering (a loose group of tribal representatives) 6 seats; the Independent Islamic Organization (individuals who claim to have Grand Ayatollah Sistani's backing) 5 seats; the Assembly for Muthanna (an ad hoc

creation of arch
politician Mohamed al-Zayadi for his allies) 4 seats; and
al-Wal'wa (a
shell party of convenience for several individuals) 3 seats.

Possible Election Scenarios

¶4. (C) Provincial elections held today could result in three different scenarios in Muthanna:

-- SCIRI/Badr, Da'wa, and Fadhila maintain sizeable blocks in the Provincial Council based on their patronage machines and their capacity to manipulate the voting process, while the Sadrists enter the Council for the first time and unseat some of the more independent and less powerful members of the smaller, provincial-based parties;

-- Tribal and independent candidates with local appeal, along with those who can run on an opposition ticket (Fadhila, the Middle Euphrates Party, the INA, the ICP) win a significant number of seats by capitalizing on popular dissatisfaction with Governor Hassani and his clique's inability to deal with the militia problem, and on a backlash against the Sadrists and JAM for plunging the province into

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repeated paroxysm of violence; or,

-- The same core cast of characters in power now play musical chairs and re-affiliate with whichever parties look likely to succeed in the elections, while the Sadrists gain a small bloc in the council at the expense of technocratic and peripheral current PC members.

¶5. (SEC//REL USA, MNFI) We judge the latter scenario to be the most likely outcome. Muthanna politics (and politicians) are opportunistic and personal rather than ideological. Individuals will affiliate with whoever controls the resources or the access they need at a particular moment. Only a handful of politicians are so branded with a particular party that they would be unable to re-affiliate with another: Governor Mohamed Ali al-Hassani (SCIRI/Badr), Qassim Hassan Auda (SCIRI/Badr), Hadi Jassim Hamza (ICP), and the principal OMS/JAM leaders - Sheikh Shamari, Sheikh Zagani, Sheikh Hassani, Dr. Hamid Rasheed, Dr. Rasheed Alawi Sha'ie, Imad Raheem, and Ahmed Abdul Kadhum. All the rest, nearly the entire current Provincial Council, are party members only insofar as its serves their interests. Their interactions are based on personal relationships, town or village origins, and tribal ties. Party labels in Muthanna, therefore, are nearly irrelevant every day of the year save for election day.

Dissatisfaction with Services and Political Parties...

¶6. (C) Elections held today would turn on several key factors. First, Muthanna residents are dissatisfied with the government's provision of basic services and its inability to dramatically increase the standards of their daily lives. This dissatisfaction would redound principally on Governor Hassani, but also to a lesser extent on those among the clique that wields the levers of power within the provincial council.

(Note: This clique does not act as one unit, but rather is fluid, with coalitions drawn from the same key pool of PC members according to the matter at stake. The breadth of parties nominally represented in this clique illustrates the point that politics are personal rather than ideological in Muthanna. End Note.) This clique includes Mohammed al-Zayadi (Assembly for Muthanna), Riyadh Majeed Abdul Amir (INA), Muhammad Arboud (Assembly for Muthanna), Ahmed Marzook Salal (Da'wa), Qassim Hassan Auda (Badr), Hadi Jabr Shirreab (Fadhila and then SCIRI), Jassim Shiraad (ICP), Fadhil Muhalhil (SCIRI), Farris Hassan Abed (Middle Euphrates Party), Abdul Hussein Mohamed al-Dhalimi (SCIRI), Qassim Jabr Abdul Husayn (Middle Euphrates Party), Muhammad Hassouni Jodan (Da'wa), and Sheikh Abdullah Shanoon Dadhil (al-Wal'wa).

¶7. (SBU) Second, Muthanna residents have expressed disillusionment with the Shi'i political parties on the national level, as well as provincially. This could translate into more support for independent, secular, and tribal candidates, but the party list electoral system tends to stifle such promising realignments.

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...But Patronage Counts

¶8. (SEC//REL USA, MNFI) Third, however, the powerful members of the Provincial Council in the clique mentioned above, have begun to prepare for upcoming provincial elections by side-lining capable and technocratic members of the PC from key committees involved in budgeting, contracting, service provision, and economic reconstruction. They have installed their own allies in positions that allow them to distribute the greatest degree of patronage through contract awards, kickbacks, jobs, and the distribution of services in order to buy the votes they will need for re-election.

Impact of Recent Violence

¶9. (C) Fourth, and most important, the series of recent security crises in Muthanna involving clashes between the ISF, JAM, and the tribes will have a profound effect on provincial politics and elections. (Note: These incidents include two extended clashes between ISF and JAM in late November 2006 and December-January 2006-7, and subsequent JAM assassinations of provincial politicians in February and March 2007. End Note.) On the one hand, the people are upset that the provincial government has not dealt with the militia problem. On the other hand, JAM has badly miscalculated in many of its escalatory actions, drawing the ire not only of the populace in Samawa, Khidr, and Rumaytha, but also antagonizing the tribes. Barring major blunders from the government forces, or involvement from Coalition Forces that would allow JAM to repaint the recent violence as "defense against the occupiers," JAM will suffer a major backlash from its recent violence. The tribes are the only political force to emerge buoyed by these recent incidents, which have proved once again their clout and their function as guarantors of security. It is unlikely that they will be able to translate popular support into electoral victories, however, because of their reluctance to participate directly and officially in politics, and their chronic inability, even when they decide to do so, to form a unified tribal slate of candidates.

¶10. (C) Muthanna citizens would be motivated to go to the polls. Providing security for them on election-day might be an issue, as it is likely that SCIRI's well-practiced techniques of voter control and manipulation would lead to clashes between it and the Sadrist. But with the backing of the police and the Iraqi Army, and careful advance planning, such concerns could be dealt with straightforwardly.
CROCKER